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SUBJECT: ONE VIEW ON TURKEY'S IRANIAN DIASPORA (C-TN7-00225)

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Classified By: Polcouns Janice G. Weiner, reasons 1.4 (b) (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY. According to one expert at a leading Turkish think tank, the Iranian population in Turkey numbers no more than fifty thousand, most of whom are students or other short-term economic migrants. Due to a fear of Iran's intelligence services, the Iranian community in Turkey maintains a low profile and purposefully weak ties to the Iranian state. A small but active group of Azeri nationalists is, however, based in Turkey. Although Turkish speaking, the Azeri-Iranians' perceived ties to the United States, as well as Turkish concerns for the stability and territorial integrity of its large neighbor, help limit Turkish support for the "South Azerbaijan" cause. Despite having only a limited presence in Turkey, this expert believes ethnic nationalism is the principal threat to the Iranian regime. Tehran, however, exploits ethnic divisions in the country to divide and weaken the opposition to perpetuate its rule. END SUMMARY.

12. (C) We met with Arif Keskin (PROTECT), Middle East Specialist at the Center for Eurasian Strategic Studies (ASAM), in Ankara, to discuss the Iranian Diaspora in Turkey. Keskin is a regular analyst on Middle East affairs. He is an Azeri-Iranian who has lived in Ankara since 1997. He has been affiliated with ASAM since then and maintains strong ties to the Iranian expatriate community in Turkey, often personally assisting Iranian refugees or other Iranians in need. In addition to providing useful insights to the Iranian community in Turkey and its relations with both the Turkish and Iranian states, Keskin offered interesting perspectives on the sharpening ethnic divides in Iran and their impact on the current regime.

13. (C) Keskin emphasizes that that the Iranian population in Turkey numbers only in the tens of thousands, but taking an accurate count is difficult. (Turkish newspaper Radikal, in April 2007, said only six thousand Iranians were living in Turkey -- a low figure which does not appear to include students, illegal migrants or Turkish citizens of Iranian descent. Other estimates number the Iranian population in the hundreds of thousands.) Most Iranians in Turkey are transitory, planning to stay for only a few years before returning to Iran or moving on to Europe or North America. In addition, because Iranians are not a recognized, legal minority in Turkey, census data does not count them. Moreover, many Iranians who do choose to settle in Turkey are ethnic Turks, and can quickly assimilate into Turkish society.

IRANIANS IN TURKEY

14. (C) According to Keskin, since the founding of the modern Turkish state, Turkey has been important to Iran as a gateway to Western culture. This role for Turkey became more prominent following the Iranian revolution when numerous Iranians, of all ethnic backgrounds, moved to Turkey. Turkish immigration law precluded most Iranians from remaining in Turkey, so many moved on to Europe and the United States, though a small community remained. Due to the aggressive, revolutionary posture of the Iranian regime, and fear of its intelligence services, this community became politically introverted. Many eventually assimilated within Turkey and, through inter-marriage, assumed Turkish citizenship. During the Khatami period, Tehran sought to become closer to this community, but the group's introversion persisted.

15. (C) Keskin defines a second group of Iranians in Turkey as economic migrants. It is a small percentage of the overall Diaspora, but is composed of Iranians who chose to settle in Turkey for economic opportunity. Many of these Iranians are in the professional and commercial classes, notably the carpet and shoe trade. This group is found mostly in Istanbul and Izmir and is also politically inactive. Many have become Turkish citizens.

16. (C) While the first two groups of Iranians in Turkey are settled and integrated, the largest group, numbering in the tens of thousands, is transitory and politically diverse. This group includes part-time economic migrants, laborers, students and business people. Many have strong social and economic ties to Iran and return regularly, though Keskin believes their political ties to the Iranian regime are weak.

Keskin said many temporary economic migrants are in Turkey illegally and they are menaced by Iranian intelligence. Likewise, Iranian students, according to Keskin, avoid their

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own embassy for fear of falling under sway of the intelligence services. Keskin gave an example of the Iranian Embassy's attempt to create a student association. Despite strong embassy efforts and a large number of Iranian students in Ankara, only eight students joined. There is a Government of Iran (GOI)-sponsored cultural association in Ankara, affiliated with the GOI's Islamic Cultural Relations Organization, called the Iran Culture House, as well as a Farsi Language Education Center (www.irankulturevi.com). Few expatriate Iranians associate with them.

17. (C) Keskin told us that a majority of this final group of Iranians are ethnic (Azeri) Turks, but not necessarily Turkish nationalists. He said that this group is affected by U.S.-Iran tension, and that their Iranian nationalist feelings often rise outside of Iran, despite an almost universal dislike for the regime. A minority, however, are Turkish nationalists and politically active. They recently held a small demonstration in front of the Iranian Embassy to mark the May anniversary of last year's protests by Azeris in Iran, which were violently broken up by the government. This politically active group maintains internet websites and blogs, and publishes newspapers and journals. One community newspaper is Tebriz'in Sesi (www.tebrizinsesi.com). Keskin also mentioned the website millishura.com. Members of this small, politically active group are usually unable to return to Iran and seek political asylum in Turkey (where it is usually denied) and abroad.

GROWING ETHNIC NATIONALISM CHALLENGING THE REGIME, YET
DIVIDING THE OPPOSITION

18. (C) Having provided an overview of the Diaspora in Turkey, Keskin shared his views on the Azeri population in Iran, their attachment to the regime, and their role in shaping it. Keskin estimates that 25-30 million Iranians are

Azeri, and that the (Sunni) Turkmen population is about 1.5-2 million. According to Keskin, Iranian Azeris freely express their cultural identity in Iran. Their Turkic language is widely spoken, even in local government offices, though it is written in Farsi script. The basic concern of Azeris is their inability to express themselves politically. The regime accuses those who aspire to of being separatist or pan-Turkic.

¶9. (C) Keskin explained that the Iranian revolution was not imposed upon the Azeris. On the contrary, he said that Azeris were instrumental in bringing Shiism to Iran and that many were leaders of the revolution. Today's older generation still maintains its links to the regime and to religion. For the new generation of Azeris, however, secular Turkishness has supplanted religion as their primary source of identity. In this regard, Turkey is a major influence. This new generation, however, finds Turkey surprisingly conservative. Young Turks, according to Keskin, are more comfortable with religion than their counterparts in Iran, where religion is considered bankrupt.

¶10. (C) While throughout Iran the state depends on an aging generation for legitimacy, Keskin said it is difficult to speculate on the regime's endurance. He believes the regime will need to evolve to accommodate social and, more importantly, ethnic demands. In its current form, Iran can neither create the political space nor suppress the aspirations of ethnic groups; "they are too vast." Ethnic division, he said, is what Iran most fears, and it's not just the Azeris.

¶11. (C) Paradoxically, according to Keskin, ethnic nationalism is also extending the life of the regime by cutting the links between the center and periphery of the country. Despite all hating the regime, Azeri, Kurd, Arab, Persian and other opposition groups do not come together. Moreover, he added, ethnic nationalists strongly oppose pro-Shah, Mujahadeen and leftist anti-regime groups. For example, unlike Arab students in the Middle East who graduate as either leftists or fundamentalists, Iranian Arabs almost always graduate as Arab nationalists. According to Keskin, student protesters who took to the streets in Tehran in recent years were Persian nationalists, who were not allowing other groups to join. He did not see Baluchis, Kurds or Arabs protesting in Tehran. The regime exploits these divisions, helping it to control the country. Keskin would not say that the country would split apart if the government did fall, but he did say that the current administrative regime would have to change quickly.

TURKEY FEARS A DE-STABILIZED IRAN; SEES U.S. DRIVING
IRANIAN-TURKISH NATIONALISM

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¶12. (C) Keskin said divisions within government and nationalist circles prevent Turkey from taking a more supportive position. Noting that the Turkish-Iranian border is one of the oldest in history, Keskin argued that Iran's territorial integrity is critical to Turkey defending its own. As a result, and despite a pan-Turkic world view among many Turkish nationalists inside and outside of government, Azeris in Iran are often not viewed as Turks (as opposed to those in Azerbaijan). In addition, Keskin believes that rising anti-American sentiment in Turkey affects Turkey's relations with Iran's Azeris. Dissident groups in Turkey are viewed as being controlled by the United States. Citing a recent example, he said a nationalist paper in Turkey covered last year's demonstration in Iran of Azeris with the following headline: "Bush Pushes Button and Azeris Activate." The public widely views Azeri-Iranian nationalist publications as being supported by the United States and local sponsors are therefore unwilling to contribute funds. Indeed, local Azeri-Iranian publications are low quality and

appear to be financed on a shoestring.

¶13. (C) Keskin said he constantly argues against this view, but growing paranoia of the United States in Turkey is obstructing a healthy relationship with Azeri-Iranians. Many Azeri-Iranians, he said, have left Turkey because they cannot achieve dialogue here. Political asylum is not frequently granted to politically active Iranians in Turkey, though local authorities usually treat Azeri nationalists well, and a support network in the country does exist to assist them. Keskin himself often takes refugees into his own home. Keskin said that Azeri broadcasting is not generally restricted in Turkey, but he did note that one large satellite provider, Turk-Sat, recently stopped carrying the Chicago-based GunAz TV. (COMMENT: Despite relatively weak ties to Azeri-Iranians, whenever Turkey is confronted by Iranian policies or activities perceived as hostile, nationalist media invoke Iran's supposed Turkishness as a lever that Turkey can pull to destabilize Iran, if it so chose. END COMMENT.)

TURKISH UNIVERSITIES: NOT A FORUM FOR DISSENT

¶14. (C) Students constitute a large portion of the Iranian population in Turkey, though Keskin had no figure on the total number of Iranian students. The Turkish economy's ability to absorb top graduates remains limited, so most will return or go further abroad. Iranian student associations exist, but have no ties to the Iranian state. One Azeri nationalist group is the Federation of South Azerbaijan Students-Turkey, which produces a bulletin as well as a quarterly academic journal called South Azerbaijan (contact: gunaz(underscore)of(at)yahoo.com). Keskin said Persian students do not organize themselves in Turkey, while also remaining distant from the Iranian embassy. A small number of Iranian scholarships send students to English language universities, and about one thousand Turkish scholarships to Turkish language programs. In general, Iranian students only attend Turkey's top public universities. In Ankara, the most popular universities for Iranians are: Middle East Technical University (METU) (English language), Ankara University (Turkish), Hacettepe (Turkish), and Gazi University (Turkish). In Istanbul, the leading universities for Iranians are Bogazici (English) and Marmara University (Turkish). In Izmir, it is Ege University (Turkish). Keskin said it would be difficult for the U.S. Embassy to speak with Iranian students, believing that we could endanger them. In the same manner, he declined to provide names of local, Turkey-based Azeri-Iranian leaders.

IRANIAN ROOTS IN TURKEY ARE NOT SO DEEP

¶15. (C) Poloff asked Keskin to compare the situation of Turkey's Iranians to those of Dubai, who recently turned out in large numbers to listen to an address by President Ahmadinejad. Apart from their larger population, Keskin said Iranians in Dubai are different in two ways: first, they have solid, organic business links with Iran, so they naturally listen to what its leaders have to say, and, second, they have been living in Dubai for a long time and miss Iran. They are naturally curious. In Turkey, Iranian roots are not so deep, and there is less nostalgia for Iran. He would not expect crowds for an Ahmadinejad rally, even if the GOT allowed it.

¶16. (C) COMMENT: The Iranian population in Turkey keeps a low profile. Identifying sources through which to gain

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additional perspectives will be a challenge. We appreciate, therefore, Keskin's sharing his views with us. While clearly an opponent of the Iranian regime, he is primarily an analyst and academic, and his opinions strike us as both dispassionate and well-informed. We will maintain contact

with him and continue to identify other opportunities to gain insights to Turkey's Iranian Diaspora. END COMMENT.

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